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THE PROBLEM OF NAMES AND SUBJECTIVITY IN CORNEILLE'S *RODOGUNE*

Imprisoned in the Bastille, Voltaire's *Ingénu* is introduced by his cellmate to French theater. After Racine's *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, *Andromaque*, and *Athalie* have sent the young Huron into tearful rapture, the Jansenist recommends another tragedy: "Lisez Rodogune, lui dit Gordon; on dit que c'est le chef-d'œuvre du théâtre; les autres pièces qui vous ont fait tant de plaisir sont peu de chose en comparaison." Corneille's favorite of his own tragedies,¹ however, leaves the *Ingénu* perplexed: "Après avoir lu très attentivement la pièce, sans autre dessein que celui d'avoir du plaisir, il regardait son ami avec des yeux secs et étonnés, et ne savait que dire."² The bafflement, or perhaps indifference, of Voltaire's fictional reader differs enormously from the response of early modern theater audiences, terrified by Corneille's portrait of evil in the tragedy's undoubted heroine, Cléopâtre.³ Mlle Dumesnil's performance, for instance, was so powerful that "le parterre tout entier, par un mouvement d'horreur aussi vif que spontané, recula devant elle, de manière à laisser un grand espace vide entre ses premiers rangs et l'orchestre." On the same occasion, the actress was apparently punched in the back by an old soldier crying, "Vas, chienne, à tous les diables," an action she took as the most flattering

1. See "Examen," *Rodogune, Princesse des Parthes, Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) 199–200. Unless noted otherwise, all references to Corneille's works are to this edition, abbreviated as OC. All references to the play are given in the main body of the text.

2. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *L'Ingénu*, ed. Richard A. Francis, *Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 63c (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006) 270.

3. If *Rodogune* has effectively disappeared from the repertoire in our own period, it was performed 396 times at the Comédie-Française between 1680 and 1900, and between 1701 and 1793 it was Corneille's third-most frequently performed work after *Le Cid* and *Le Menteur* (OC 2: 1270). On the eighteenth century's critical esteem for *Rodogune*, see, for instance, Joseph de Laporte and Sébastien-Roch-Nicholas Chamfort, *Dictionnaire dramatique*, vol. 3 (Paris: Lacombe, 1776) 67–68 and Charles de Fieux, chevalier de Mouhy, *Abrégé de l'histoire du théâtre français*, vol. 1 (Paris: Jolly, 1780) 419.

praise she had ever received.⁴ The response of Voltaire's character, particularly when contrasted with that of the theatre audience, perfectly illustrates Serge Doubrovsky's description of *Rodogune* as "une énigme pour la critique";⁵ for if scholars have debated the problem of evil in the tragedy,⁶ its analysis of power,⁷ religion,⁸ and providence,⁹ and its depiction of gender relations,¹⁰ one of its fundamental problems—that of the heroine's name—remains unresolved. By employing various theoretical paradigms, particularly Judith Butler's account of naming and subjection, this article proposes a solution to that problem and, by demonstrating that *Rodogune* is concerned with the formation and integrity of the self, it also aims to show that Cornelian tragedy has metaphysical rather than exclusively political dimensions.¹¹

The public display of the name is, as Jean Starobinski has argued, fundamental to the nature of the Cornelian hero: "Chez Corneille, l'ostentation et le défi prendront souvent la forme d'une exhibition du nom. Il suffit que le héros réaffirme son nom, et se proclame fidèle à celui-ci: il se sera ainsi 'découvert tout entier' aux yeux d'un témoin universel."¹² Certainly names are central to *Rodogune*'s plot, which hinges on two acts of naming by the two principal female characters. While the play's dedication to the prince de Condé values warfare and political action as honorable occupations for a man, within the tragedy itself a woman can hold no lasting political power in her own right: "Le peuple épouvanté, qui déjà dans son âme / Ne suivait qu'à regret les ordres d'une femme, / Voulut forcer la reine à choisir un époux" (1.1.47–49).

4. Pierre-David Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du Théâtre français, depuis 1600 jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1810) 195–96.

5. Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 289.

6. Christopher J. Gossip, "The Problem of *Rodogune*," *Studi Francesi* 22 (1978): 231–40 and René Fromilhague, "À propos de la Cléopâtre de *Rodogune*," *Cahiers de littérature du XVIIe siècle* 1 (1979): 43–53.

7. Hélène Merlin, "Cinna, *Rodogune*, *Nicomède*: le roi et le moi," *Littératures* 37 (1997): 67–86.

8. Marc Fumaroli, "Une dramaturgie de la liberté: tragique païen et tragique chrétien dans *Rodogune*," *Héros et orateurs: rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes* (Geneva: Droz, 1996) 170–208.

9. Gervais E. Reed, "Visual Imagery and Christian Humanism in *Rodogune*," *The French Review* 63 (1990): 464–74 and Georges Forestier, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'œuvre* (Geneva: Droz, 2004) 353–57.

10. Claire Carlin, "The Woman as Heavy: Female Villains in the Theater of Corneille," *The French Review* 59 (1986): 389–98.

11. Fumaroli states that "la tragédie cornélienne n'est donc pas d'ordre métaphysique, comme pour les Grecs, mais d'ordre exclusivement politique" (206).

12. Jean Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) 63.

Cléopâtre can now no longer rule as regent,¹³ and so must reveal the name of her eldest son and heir: "Un seul mot aujourd'hui maître de ma fortune / M'ôte, ou donne à jamais le sceptre, et Rodogune," says Antiochus (1.1.75). Cléopâtre is aware that her power derives from this act of nomination (the giving of a proper name that identifies and constitutes a character) as she tells Laonice:

Ne saurais-tu juger si je nomme un Roi,
C'est pour le commander, et combattre pour moi?
J'en ai le choix en main avec le droit d'aînesse,
.....
J'userai bien du droit que j'ai de le nommer. (2.2.493–98)

In the secondary plot, the royal princes and Laonice would have the taciturn Rodogune disclose the name of the man she loves: "Garde-toi de nommer mon vainqueur" (1.5.385). Both Cléopâtre and Rodogune are thus compelled to perform acts of predication in that they must attach to preexisting names a title (of heir or lover) that would clarify the identity of another character. The importance of names in the play is also evident when, at a moment of dramatic suspense, Séleucus almost names his murderer: "Régnez, et surtout, mon cher frère, / Gardez-vous de la même main. / C'est [. . .] La Parque à ce mot lui coupe la parole" (5.4.1645–48). At this word La Parque cuts him off. As Jacques Rosner, director of the Comédie-Française's production of the play in 1998, writes, "Tout l'intérêt de la mise en scène de *Rodogune*, réside dans la mise au clair de tous ces mécanismes cachés et secrets."¹⁴ Given the importance of names in the tragedy's plot, one might thus think that Starobinski's model is appropriate, especially when Cléopâtre, in a typically Cornelian gesture, invests her name with a certain potency: "Et mon nom peut encore ici plus que le vôtre" (2.3.660). Yet the play is marked by a disquieting absence of names, that of the heroine above all. We might have presumed that the one who names is already named, that she is already positioned and identified within language, and yet her name is occluded in performance, replaced by

13. *Rodogune* was, of course, created under the regency of Anne of Austria, and while in many senses Cléopâtre is an anti-heroine in the vein of the *femme forte* prized in the period, it is unimaginable that she in any way represents the regent. See Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610–1652* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).

14. See Jean-Pierre Miquel, ed., *Le programme—Rodogune* (Paris: Blanchard fils, 1998) 18. See also Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 301–2.

such terms as “une Mégère” (2.4.679), “une mère cruelle” (2.4.723), and “une Reine cruelle” (3.2.835); and of course, the play itself bears her rival’s name. The obligation to perform an act of predication thus contrasts with the lack of an act of nomination. It must be recognized that antonomasia is a poetically useful and far-from-rare technique in classical tragedy, and that the plot of a number of works centers on the act of naming; the obvious example is that Racine’s *Phèdre* has C  none name Hippolyte as the object of her passion in a bid to exculpate herself (1.3). It is also the case that several early modern plays are named after apparently secondary characters, such as *Cinna* and *Britannicus*. Nonetheless the abb   d’Aubignac insists, in the *Pratique du th   tre* (1657), that dramatic characters’ names be clearly evidenced,¹⁵ and La Porte and Chamfort write of “l’attention vicieuse que Corneille a eue de ne point nommer Cl  op  tre dans toute sa pi  ce.”¹⁶ The absence of Cl  op  tre’s name is perplexing for an audience that, in Voltaire’s view at least, requires such a name so as to make sense of this obscure plot: “Il n’est pas dit que cette veuve de Nicanor   tait Cl  op  tre, m  re des deux princes, et que le roi Antiochus avait promis de rendre la couronne aux enfants du premier lit. Le spectateur a besoin qu’on lui d  brouille cette histoire. Cl  op  tre n’est pas nomm  e une seule fois dans la pi  ce.”¹⁷ Yet if the heroine’s name is never spoken on stage, it is of course signaled in Corneille’s text every time she speaks and in several stage directions, and is unavoidably present in the play’s paratexts. Like a young child, Cl  op  tre’s name may be seen but not heard. Christian Biet and Christophe Triau have noted this discrepancy between the audience’s and the reader’s experience of the play, and, asking if there are not unexplained reasons why this is the case, they suggest that further consideration of this issue might reveal “le caract  re proprement *innommable* de la r  gente machiav  lique, ambitieuse et cruelle.”¹⁸ This article pursues the problem of Cl  op  tre’s silenced name.

Some reasons for the absence of the heroine’s name have already been offered, notably by Voltaire, whose own close reading of the tragedy, as evidenced in his *Commentaires sur Corneille* (1765), provokes a considerably more prolix, though no less perplexed, response than that of his ingenuous hero. As well as noting every apparent slip in register and construction, he observes that Corneille clumsily neglects to identify his characters or location

15. Fran  ois H  delin, abb   d’Aubignac, *La Pratique du th   tre*, ed. H  l  ne Baby (Paris: Honor   Champion, 2001) 397–98.

16. Laporte and Chamfort 2: 67.

17. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille II*, ed. David Williams, *Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 54 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1975) 483.

18. Christian Biet and Christophe Triau, *Qu’est-ce que le th   tre?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) 596.

by name. Thus, in response to the line "Ce grand jour est venu, mon frère, où notre Reine" (1.1.7), Voltaire asks "Quelle reine? Elle n'est pas nommée dans cette scène. On ne dit point que l'on soit en Syrie, et il faudrait le dire d'abord."¹⁹ He criticizes the first line of the second scene on similar grounds: "On ne sait encore si c'est Antiochus ou Séleucus qui parle. On ignore même que l'un est Antiochus, l'autre Séleucus. Il est à remarquer qu'Antiochus n'est nommé qu'au quatrième acte à la scène 3, et Séleucus à la scène 5, et que Cléopâtre n'est jamais nommée."²⁰ A reader more generous than Voltaire might argue that this absence is not a blunder on the dramatist's part, but is in fact integral to the portrayal of the heroine in a tragedy that Corneille thought his most finely constructed.²¹ Indeed, the playwright addresses the problem of the heroine's name at some length in two of the tragedy's paratexts:

On s'étonnera peut-être de ce que j'ai donné à cette tragédie le nom de *Rodogune*, plutôt que celui de *Cléopâtre* sur qui tombe toute l'action tragique . . . [Je] confesse ingénument que ce poème devait plutôt porter le nom de *Cléopâtre* que de *Rodogune*; mais ce qui m'a fait en user ainsi, a été la peur que j'ai eue qu'à ce nom le peuple ne se laissât préoccuper des idées de cette fameuse et dernière reine d'Égypte, et ne confondît cette reine de Syrie avec elle, s'il l'entendait prononcer. C'est pour cette même raison que j'ai évité de le mêler dans mes vers, n'ayant jamais fait parler de cette seconde Médée que sous celui de la reine.²²

The avowed anxiety of catachresis (the misapplication of a name) strikes a hollow note, for while Corneille dreads contamination by the Egyptian queen (recently depicted and named in *La Mort de Pompée*),²³ he will happily evoke the name of another of his characters, in this case an infanticidal witch.²⁴

19. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille* 479.

20. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille* 484.

21. "[. . .] cet heureux assemblage est ménagé de sorte qu'elle s'élève d'acte en acte. Le second passe le premier, le troisième est au-dessus du second, et le dernier sur tous les autres. L'action y est une, grande, complète, sa durée ne va point, ou fort peu, au-delà de celle de la représentation, le jour en est le plus illustre qu'on puisse imaginer, et l'unité de lieu s'y rencontre en la manière que je l'explique dans le troisième de ce discours, et avec indulgence que j'ai demandée pour le théâtre" (Corneille, "Examen" OC 2: 200).

22. Corneille, "Appian Alexandrin," OC 2: 196–97.

23. Intriguingly, while *Rodogune* effaces its heroine's name, *La Mort de Pompée* (1643) is named after a character who never appears, rather like the Président Hénault's later experimental work *François II, roi de France* (1740).

24. Whereas the name of the more famous Cléopâtre risks distracting the spectator (though not the reader), historical figures are named precisely so that the reader may

Moreover, he endows his readers with different intellectual capabilities (or at least implicitly acknowledges various sets of readers); he assumes their erudition by directing them to works by the classical historian Appian of Alexandria and the Jewish historian Josephus, as well as to the first book of the Maccabees, and yet fears that they will be distracted by the merest sound of the heroine's suggestive name. Corneille returns to this same problem in the "Examen":

J'ai fait porter à la pièce le nom de cette princesse, plutôt que celui de Cléopâtre, que je n'ai même osé nommer dans mes vers, de peur qu'on ne confondît cette reine de Syrie avec cette fameuse princesse d'Égypte qui portait le même nom, et que l'idée de celle-ci, beaucoup plus connue que l'autre, ne semât une dangereuse préoccupation parmi les auditeurs.²⁵

An example of the avoidance of the heroine's name occurs when Laonice recalls that "[l]a Reine de l'Égypte a rappelé nos Princes" (1.4.279); to utter the forbidden name Cléopâtre here would certainly evoke the Egyptian queen. Voltaire dismisses Corneille's explanation as implausible and, evoking a particularly eighteenth-century model of theatrical sociability, claims that "il n'y a guère d'apparences que les spectateurs instruits, qui instruisent bientôt les autres, eussent pris cette reine de Syrie pour la maîtresse de César." It is again Voltaire who signals the most problematic implication of Corneille's explanation: "Tout cela est un peu confus dans le fond, et est exprimé confusément; plusieurs lecteurs en sont révoltés. On est plus indulgent à la représentation."²⁶ Far from satisfying any suspicions, Corneille's account of his heroine's name instead provokes a new problem to be resolved: Why should the name Cléopâtre cause "une dangereuse préoccupation parmi les auditeurs" but not for the play's readers?²⁷ Just as Cléopâtre asks Laonice, "Sais-tu que mon secret n'est pas ce que l'on pense?" (2.2.439), so might we pursue another explanation than that offered by the playwright.

Ralph Albanese offers the only sustained examination of names in *Rodogune* and argues that the heroine's lack of a spoken name allows her to hide her true criminal identity. Her suicide, he argues, finally and gloriously sees

measure up the male hero; the play's dedication invokes "des Alexandres et des Césars," whose exploits are effaced by the prince de Condé; see Corneille, OC 2: 193.

25. Corneille, "Examen," OC 2: 199.

26. Both quotations, Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille*, 483.

27. Any potential disturbance is entirely effaced in S. Aspinwall's English translation, where the heroine is renamed Arsinoe. See *Rodogune, or the Rival brothers* (London: Dodslev. 1765).

the definitive emergence of her self, paradoxically affirming in death her self-mastery: "Dans sa malédiction finale, elle se nomme meurtrière et le fait avec éclat."²⁸ As useful as Albanese's analysis is, particularly in its subtle examination of the postponement of the naming act, it presumes that the tragedy's heroine has an interiorized identity that is progressively unveiled through the course of the play.²⁹ Although he does not refer explicitly to J. L. Austin's theory of the performative speech act, Albanese similarly presupposes a sovereign subject as causal origin of that which he or she names and therefore generates; in other words, Cléopâtre can only name (and thus constitute) her successor because of her integral heroic self. Implicit in Albanese's analysis is the belief that the name marks that which already exists, and to speak that name is thus to reveal the character's "true self." While some evidence might indeed suggest that Cléopâtre's essential self is progressively displayed—"Apprends, ma confidente, apprend à me connaître" (2.2.443) and "Connais-moi tout entière" (2.2.503)—this is less a case of self-revelation than of self-creation; the Cornelian heroine does not exist outside of her words, and cannot reveal or betray a "natural being," for this exists only as a fiction to be refuted in the elaboration of her heroic status.³⁰ There is no pristine identity to be disclosed, no heroic self behind the expressions of heroism; the character is constituted solely, repeatedly, and progressively through discourse. A different solution to the problem of Cléopâtre's missing name must thus be found, one that is attentive to the heroic status but that does not accept the fiction of an identity that preexists the speech act.

A solution may be found in the Syrian queen's abiding anxiety of being a subject. Manifest throughout the paratexts and the main body of the play is Cléopâtre's resistance to the status of subject. For example, in the "Appian Alexandre" text we read of the "jalouse fureur de cette mère qui se résout plutôt à perdre ses fils qu'à se voir sujette de sa rivale," the "Examen" notes that she will destroy her sons "plutôt que de se voir sujette de son ennemie,"³¹ and Cléopâtre herself declares: "Il est doux de périr après ses ennemis, / Et de quelque rigueur que le Destin me traite, / Je perds moins à mourir, qu'à vivre leur sujette" (5.1.1534–36). Certainly, a subject may be contrasted with the sovereign (as Laonice does explicitly at 1.1.14, and Antiochus does

28. Ralph Albanese, "Nomination et identité dans *Rodogune*," *Romanic Review* 76 (1985): 10.

29. Georges Forestier similarly argues that an essential personality awaits revelation in *Héraclius*, *Don Sanche d'Aragon* and *Cédipe*. See his article "Corneille et le mystère de l'identité" *Pierre Corneille, Actes du colloque tenu à Rouen du 2 au 6 Octobre 1984*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: PUF, 1985) 665–78.

30. See Starobinski 50–55.

31. Corneille, OC 2: 196; 203.

paradoxically at 4.3.1378), on whom the former is politically dependent. The period's major dictionaries recognize this meaning. The Académie Française describes the subject as that which is "sous la domination d'un Prince, ou d'un Estat souverain,"³² and Furetière defines it as that which is "né soumis naturellement à un Prince souverain, ou à une Republique";³³ and Cléopâtre accordingly lists the subject's duties toward the sovereign: "Vivez pour les servir, respectez-les tous deux, / Aimez-les, et mourez, s'il est besoin, pour eux" (5.3.1581–82). In this sense, Mitchell Greenberg is correct in asserting that Cléopâtre is "motivated by a monolithic drive not to be a subject, nor to be subjugated to another."³⁴ Yet just as the subject is subjugated by a pervasive power, so is it ostensibly coterminous with the core of volition and agency. When Furetière notes that "sujet [. . .] signifie aussi cause, occasion, fondement," it appears as the source of determination and action, and this notion of subject as source is crucial to Corneille's moral defense of his play in the *Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*:

Cléopâtre dans *Rodogune* est très méchante, il n'y a point de paricide qui lui fasse horreur, pourvu qu'il la puisse conserver sur un trône qu'elle préfère à toutes choses, tant son attachement à la domination est violent; mais tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d'une grandeur d'âme, qui a quelque chose de si haut, qu'en même temps qu'on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent.³⁵

Saint-Évremond similarly argues that it is a character's "grandeur d'âme" that excites admiration in an audience.³⁶ If Corneille's account is accepted, Cléopâtre's causal self determines and eclipses her crimes, and the challenge is thus to locate and define that entity, even if such a fundamental soul is not

32. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, vol. 2 (Paris: Coignard, 1694) 513.

33. Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, vol. 2 (La Haye, Arnout et Reinier Leers: 1690) n. pag. (entry "sujet").

34. Mitchell Greenberg, *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose: The Family Romance of French Classicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 107.

35. Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) 129. Corneille stresses the importance of admiration for a more virtuous character in the "Examen" of *Nicomède* (OC 2: 643).

36. Charles de Saint-Évremond, "De la tragédie ancienne et moderne," *Œuvres en prose*, ed. René Tournois, vol. 4 (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1962–69) 171.

always visible,³⁷ as the Père Du Bosc writes at the same moment of *Rodogune*'s first performance:

Pour être généreux ou magnanime, faut-il dire toutes ses pensées, faut-il montrer son cœur à découvert, à tout le monde; et en tous temps? Certes, c'est où il faut bien prendre garde: le même Aristote qui dit que le cœur magnanime ne dissimule point, dit pourtant, *qu'il doit dissimuler devant le vulgaire*, qui n'est pas capable des grands secrets, et de toutes sortes de vérités. Et en effet, se montrer aux simples avec tant de lumière, c'est les accabler et les perdre.³⁸

Du Bosc's account of the self and its visibility might seem to solve the problem posed by Cléopâtre: her horrid, true self is simply too overwhelming to be perceived by lesser mortals such as Laonice ("Pour un esprit de cour, et nourri chez les grands, / Tes yeux dans leurs secrets sont bien peu pénétrants" [2.2.441–42]) and Antiochus, who averts his eyes from his mother's actions, saying, "Sur les noires couleurs d'un si triste tableau / Il faut passer l'éponge, ou tirer le rideau" (2.3.593–94). Just as Albanese would argue, Cléopâtre's terrible self is seemingly revealed as the play progresses, and her anxiety of being cast as a political subject is exactly equivalent to the necessity of masking her true self by not being named.

Yet what if that interior and organizing core, that "grandeur d'âme," is less a cause than an effect of such behavior, and what if the subject is not revealed but rather constituted through Cléopâtre's and others' speech? If there is no self that exists prior to the performance that consolidates the subject, then any apparent disclosure of such a fiction is misleading, such a fiction being simply a "truth effect" of regulations and practices that are hidden from view.³⁹ Another explanation of the problem of the heroine's recoil from being a recognizable subject might therefore be sought, one that might account for that double bind of subjection that initiates and sustains agency through subjugation, a paradox neatly summarized by Furetière's definition of the subject as

37. According to the Académie, the soul is precisely that interior faculty that is "le principe de la vie dans les choses vivantes [. . .] se dit particulièrement en parlant de l'homme, et signifie, Ce qui est en luy, qui le rend capable de penser, de vouloir, et de raisonner" (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* 1: 34).

38. Jacques Du Bosc, *La Femme heroïque, ou les heroïnes comparées avec les héros en toute sorte de vertus*, vol. 1 (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville et Augustin Courbé, 1645) 258–59; italics in original.

39. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 136–40.

“obligé par sa nature ou sa condition, ou par son devoir, à *faire* et à *souffrir* plusieurs choses.”⁴⁰ Rather than follow Austin’s concept of the speaking subject (as does Albanese), or subscribe to a Freudian scrutiny of family, desire, and subjectivity (as does Greenberg), we might find in Judith Butler’s account of subjection a means to untangle the nexus of speech, power, and the subject in *Rodogune*. Butler proposes that agency without linguistic bearing is impossible, for the name conditions and sustains the subject; this article engages with that proposal to elucidate the peculiar absence of Cléopâtre’s name on stage and its troublesome reappearance in print.

Butler argues that the subject is not a stable entity that preexists, determines, and sustains the individual’s acts; rather, it is a tenuous expression of the reiterated effects of power. Power and the subject cannot be clearly opposed, neither in the sense that a prior and external power fully determines the subject, nor that power is the instrumental effect of the subject;⁴¹ instead, the subject might be considered the culturally intelligible effect of “pervasive and mundane signifying acts of everyday life.”⁴² There can thus be no unique founding moment of the subject, as the subject forever repeats (also in a discontinuous fashion) the forms of regulatory power. The subject is, as Furetière anticipated, subordinated by the very power on which its agency depends. Language is central to Butler’s account of subjection, for the “subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency.”⁴³ We are enabled by the language that we do not invent, to which we must necessarily subscribe, and that may injure us. This is true in *Rodogune*, where language is far from stable or dependable; there are numerous mentions of unclear information or false rumors such as “un bruit confus” (1.1.40), “un faux bruit s’y coula touchant la mort du roi” (1.1.46), “un faux rapport” (1.4.229), “serments fallacieux” (2.1.395), and of course the “fatale obscurité” of Séleucus’s final words (5.4.1657). Similarly, the link between signified and signifier is not a tight one, and the same object can be described by different, even contradictory terms. Thus the murder of Nicanor is for Cléopâtre equivocal enough to be termed “soit crime ou justice” (2.2.561).⁴⁴ Only those characters who take up this inherited and uncertain language may achieve any kind of agency, and in an elementary sense

40. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 2: n. pag. (entry “sujet”; emphasis added).

41. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 12–16.

42. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 145.

43. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* 11.

44. William Dickson has argued that “after an initial period in which Corneille glorified linguistic creativity in his comedies, his characters’ speech becomes more opaque in the tragedies,” and he takes *Rodogune* as an example of this shift. See his article “Corneille:

Cléopâtre epitomizes this paradox: "Si je cache en quel rang le Ciel les a fait naître, / Vois, vois que tant que l'ordre en demeure douteux, / Aucun des deux ne règne et je règne pour eux" (2.2.444–46). Cléopâtre's continuing authority depends precisely on negotiating (and postponing) the very act of predication that will end her authority.

A more particular and relevant thread in Butler's account of the construct-ness of subjectivity and of the part played by linguistic processes is the name that both subordinates and enables. The proper name does not refer to a preexistent individual (as Albanese would imply); instead, the nomination and the constitution of the subject are simultaneous and equivalent, for the name serves to suture disparate signifiers into a single identity.⁴⁵ Again, *Rodogune*'s plot demonstrates this process, for while in much of the play the twins vainly cling to similarity and equality—"demeurons unis, / C'est l'unique moyen de voir nos maux finis," hopes Séleucus (2.4.749–50)—the name of *heir* or *beloved* necessarily creates a sense of singularity. Like language in general, titles and names in *Rodogune*'s paratexts are equivocal and may be fixed according to need and circumstance; for example, in the "Appian Alexandre" text, Corneille explains that the Syrian king's real name was Démétrius, but that he chose to call him Nicanor "à cause que le vers souffrait plus aisément l'un que l'autre," that a puppet king was known as either Alexandre or Antiochus, and that when Diodotus usurped the Syrian throne, he took the name Tryphon.⁴⁶ The clearest example of the mutability of predicates is, of course, that of the first born, a genealogy no longer dependent on biology but on allegiance: "Embrasser ma querelle est le seul droit d'aînesse, / La mort de Rodogune en nommera l'aîné" (2.3.644–45). The experience by which the predication act inaugurates a comprehensive and comprehensible subject is a painful one, a point exemplified in *Rodogune* in that the dual title of king and husband comes at the price of Séleucus's death. The trauma inherent in "name-calling," to which Butler is especially attentive, is clearly demonstrated in the Académie's definition of the word *nom*: "On se dit fig. Decliner son nom, pour dire, Estre obligé de déclarer soy-mesme qui l'on est, afin de se faire connoistre. *Il n'y a point de plaisir de decliner son nom, il a esté obligé de decliner son nom.*"⁴⁷ This definition confirms that the process by which coercive (and unlocatable) power makes the subject account for itself through nomination is an uneasy one. The name that one is compelled to give is the key to being

The Spoken and the Unspoken," *The Seventeenth Century: Directions Old and New*, eds. Elizabeth Moles and Noël Peacock (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1992) 50.

45. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 208–10.

46. Corneille, OC 2: 195–98.

47. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* 2: 125; italics in original.

recognized, but what exactly is being recognized here? There is no intelligible subject prior to the act of speaking the name; instead, “the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on the subject, but forms that subject.”⁴⁸ The trauma in being named is caused by the subjection to a discourse not of one’s own choosing, even if such a name appears to be that which offers the possibility of existence and agency.

The name that “tends to fix, to freeze, to delimit” would compromise Cléopâtre’s bid for total independence:⁴⁹ “Je ne veux plus que moi dedans ma confidence” (4.5.1391). This queen aspires to such a degree of self-determination and self-creation that she would become entirely artificial, that she would denature herself, as she declares: “Sors de mon cœur, Nature” (4.7.1491). Corneille’s decision to silence the heroine’s name thus underlies her resistance to being a subject; her namelessness matches her ambition to perform the role of the autonomous and desexualized ruler for which the political context cannot account. In short, the lack of a spoken name stands for the heroine’s refusal to be a subject.

Cléopâtre certainly resists being a political subject, but at no point in the play does she or any other character express an aversion to speaking her name. Butler’s paradigm might thus be considered inappropriate. The silencing of the evocative and recognized name is certainly a form of censorship in that it circumscribes “the social parameters of speakable discourse, of what will and will not be admissible in public discourse.” In determining the legitimate boundaries of speech, censorship of the name (just like act of nomination itself) “seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms” and “the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech.”⁵⁰ This productive censorship simply does not occur when *Rodogune* is staged, for no characters speak of any ban; Cléopâtre’s name is unspoken not because of her insistence (to repeat, such insistence would effectively make a subject of her), but because within the performance of the play, Cléopâtre moves beyond “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.”⁵¹ Unnatural, desexed, and literally unspeakable, Corneille’s heroine appears to epitomize Butler’s analysis: “*To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one’s status as a subject.*”⁵² Cléopâtre is thus antithetical to Rodogune, who uses language in a more conventional, even legitimate manner, in that she

48. Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 225–26; italics in original.

49. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 35.

50. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 132–33.

51. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17.

52. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 133; emphasis in original.

speaks moderately until forced into speech by the two brothers.⁵³ As Butler posits, “To embody the norms that govern speakability in one’s speech is to consummate one’s status as a subject of speech”;⁵⁴ and Rodogune similarly accepts the full range of political norms—“Rentrions donc sous les lois que m’impose la Paix” (4.1.1225)—including those that prevent her from reigning in her own right, but do permit her to rule covertly: “Et s’il est assez fort pour me servir d’appui, / Je le ferai régner, mais en régnant sur lui” (3.3.853–54). By accepting the name of Cléopâtre’s daughter—“Il m’est trop doux”—she submits to a respectful subject status within an apparently conventional family scenario (see 5.3.1559–64). Furthermore, she is intelligible as a heroine within the dynamics of tragic plot as defined by Corneille, for it is she who survives arguably the greatest peril: “Quant à la [tragédie], c’est le péril d’un héros qui la constitue, et lorsqu’il en est sorti, l’action est terminée.”⁵⁵ Rodogune provides the play’s gloss of intelligibility, optimistically advertised in its very title.

Butler’s central question is: “Can we imagine a subject apart from his or her linguistic bearing?”⁵⁶ An analysis of Cléopâtre as she appears on stage suggests that the answer is yes and that figure thus challenges Butler’s account by which agency without subjectivity in the field of speech is impossible, given that agency and the subject are repeatedly formed according to the same set of constitutive foreclosures.⁵⁷ When Cléopâtre first appears on stage, she aspires to achieve agency without subjectivity: “Montrons-nous toutes deux, non plus comme sujettes, / Mais telle que je suis, et telle que vous êtes, / Le Parthe est éloigné, nous pouvons tout oser” (2.2.407–9). Her final appearance indicates that she achieves this aim, for she is able to bring down a curse on her own descendants (5.4.1819–24). The efficacy of her curse gives the theatre audience the impression of an agent free from subjection. In addition, it is difficult to agree with those critics who believe that Cléopâtre is punished by dying,⁵⁸ because she had already relished the prospect of a gloriously criminal departure (2.1.411–14). But Cléopâtre’s apparently unique triumph (and for which Butler’s analysis as detailed hitherto would be unable to account) is compromised when one realizes that the individual need not actively resist

53. See Paul Bénichou, “Formes et significations dans la *Rodogune* de Corneille,” *Variétés critiques* (Paris: José Corti, 1996) 20, Doubrovsky 299, and Fumaroli 187–88.

54. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 133; emphasis in original.

55. Corneille, *Discours de l’utilité et des parties du poème dramatique* (OC 3: 126).

56. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 30.

57. Butler defines the subject’s agency not as “a property of [that] subject, an inherent will or freedom, but an effect of power” (*Excitable Speech* 139).

58. See, for example, Marie-Odile Sweetser, “Les femmes et le pouvoir dans le théâtre cornélien,” *Pierre Corneille, Actes du colloque tenu à Rouen du 2 au 6 octobre 1984*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: PUF, 1985) 605–14.

being named in order to escape subjection and that subjection is not a process restricted to the Althusserian scenario of an acknowledged interpellation by an identifiable agent. It is not necessary that a speaking individual (judge, policeman, priest) should inaugurate a subject, for as the play's dedication to the prince de Condé makes clear, language itself has an agency of its own: "Thionville, Philisbourg et Norlinghen étaient des lieux funestes pour la France; elle n'en pouvait entendre les noms sans gémir."⁵⁹ The source of the speech act may not be locatable, but language (particularly when associated with menace and aggression) works on an identifiable subject, and Butler notes that a "mechanism of discourses," unheard and unknown, may constitute the subject without that subject's knowledge.⁶⁰ It remains true that there is no self prior to the construction of the subject, but such construction can occur off stage, as it were. Thus, while an ephemeral stage performance of *Rodogune* suggests that the Syrian queen is not a subject, one might "still [be] constituted [as a subject] by discourse, but at a distance from oneself,"⁶¹ in this case by the printed texts.

On stage, Cléopâtre is a magnificent, unique, and disruptive figure who, as Voltaire observes, astonishes and seduces the spectator: "On dit qu'au théâtre on n'aime pas les scélérats. Il n'y a point de criminelle plus odieuse que Cléopâtre, et cependant, on se plaît à la voir." The theatre audience may be swept away by this vision of evil without concern for the moral implications of delighting in her criminality: "C'est que l'imagination, émue de la grandeur du spectacle, se demande rarement compte de son plaisir."⁶² Writing in the *Discours des trois unités*, Corneille follows Aristotle to argue that there should be no such difference between the viewing and reading experiences, and that a well-made tragedy should be "capable de plaire, sans le secours des Comédiens, et hors de la représentation."⁶³ In order that "la tragédie soit aussi belle à la lecture qu'à la représentation," Corneille recommends that the dramatist render "facile à l'imagination du lecteur tout ce que le théâtre présente à la vue des spectateurs." This statement does not hold true for *Rodogune*, as the parity between reading and performance is disturbed. In a sense, the reader does not have *all* that the spectator has, but *more*, for he or she knows Cléopâtre's name. The name that was so effectively effaced in the theatre is insistently present on the page; the characters might not name the queen as Cléopâtre, but Corneille, Voltaire, and we certainly can. The reader is aware of Corneille's censoring of the forbidden name, a barring that fundamentally

59. Corneille, OC 2: 194.

60. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 31–33.

61. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 33.

62. Voltaire, *Commentaires sur Corneille* 548, 513.

63. Corneille. OC 3: 182.

constitutes the subject;⁶⁴ and the threat of catachresis that was averted for the spectator inevitably returns for the reader every time the name Cléopâtre appears, thereby denying the heroine the absolute singularity to which she aspires. The suppressed name returns and confirms Cléopâtre's status as a subject, not a nameless agent who operates outside of the conditions of power. Cléopâtre in print is a subject in spite of herself. The reader thus encounters a less troublesome and potentially less engaging figure than that beheld by the spectator. An inextricably political *and* metaphysical work, *Rodogune* is a coherent depiction of the pervasive conditions that inaugurate, sustain, and provoke the subject.

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64. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 138.